daze

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eyes open, yet at the same time, still closed [AU][Homura centric]
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It's snowing the day she's born, an unexpected fall of red and white as they race through the perilous streets, trying to save both mother and child.

She's small, so very tiny, two months delivered before her due date.

As the doctors hurriedly roll her away, her mother smiles tiredly, eyes following after that small figure of her newly born daughter as she disappears around the corner.

"She's a fighter," she whispers softly, eyes slowly closing with exhaustion, "and... I know she'll burn bigger, and brighter with every breath she takes. I'll name her Homura. She'll... definitely live up to her name."

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She lives with tubes and machines surrounding her for weeks, grasping onto the thin thread between life and death.

Her chance of survival is low, and the doctors have already spoken to her parents, telling them that they need to prepare themselves for the inevitable.

She perserveres, weak and fragile as her tiny fingers somehow still hold on.

Days pass and blend, until finally, she's somehow breathing steadily on her own.

The doctors and nurses call her a miracle; her parents know that she definitely has a guardian angel looking after her, one with gentle eyes, and a kind smile that will watch over this child as she grows.

Her mother cradles her in her arms, and watches with wonder as a pair of bright, lavender eyes peer up at her, before squinting with sleepiness.

"Good morning, Homura-chan. You've fought long and hard, haven't you?"

She yawns in response, eyes now closing, and she feels a soft kiss on her forehead as she's lulled to sleep.

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She's not a fussy baby, and at times too quiet. The doctors had warned that there may be complications due to her early birth. Despite their best efforts, they soon confirm that she has a weaker heart, one that won't grow strong enough to support her as she gets bigger.

It's the beginning of a series of medications, and the continuation of hospital visits that will always follow her throughout her life.

With tears in her eyes, her mother hugs her tightly. "I'm so sorry, Homura-chan."

She gently pats her mother's back, not understanding, but knowing that her mother is upset. She glances over her shoulders, tilting her head at something, before pressing her face against her mother's chest.

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She grows slowly, and her parents try their best to show her how much they love her. Every morning she's given a hug, and every night

she's given a kiss. The only thing missing from her life is companionship from other children, which they hope to give her when she's a little bit older, and a little bit stronger.

When she finally reaches the age of five, she's excited to start school, to play with other kids like the ones she has seen as they pass the park on her way to her hospital appointments.

On the first day, her red backpack sits untouched inside her closet, still packed with supplies, still brand new.

She herself lies in a hospital bed, body racked with a fever that will leave her bedridden for weeks.

When she recovers and is well enough to attend school, her shyness is off putting, and unused to socializing with other children, she finds herself all alone. The teacher takes pity on her, placing her into one of the many established groups, but the other children only include her when they are forced to.

At lunch, she sits by herself, body hunched over a small notebook that she keeps with her at all times.

She draws, and draws, and it's only in those pictures that she's not alone.

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Her teacher tells their worries to her parents, and one day, they sit her down after dinner, asking if she's lonely.

They see Homura glance to the side, looking at something like she always does, before she shakes her head as her small hands reach for her parents.

"No," she says quietly, and they both pull her in for a hug, wondering how their little girl is so strong.

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Her parents continue to buy her notebooks, and each one is filled with childish scrawls and crayon drawings of her, her parents, and a mysterious scribble that always follows her around.

As Homura flips open a new book, her mother pores over the most recent sketches, fingers gently brushing against each line.

"Homura-chan?"

She makes a small sound of acknowledgement.

"Do you like the colour pink? Okaa-san always buys you purple clothes, but would you like some pink clothes next time?" She looks up, eyes now on her daughter who is still frantically scribbling away.

Eventually, Homura's hand finally stills. She tilts her head, as if she's listening to something only she can hear.

"Homura-chan?"

Nervous lavender eyes flicker over in response, before they once again look away.

Her mother reaches out, using her fingers to brush Homura's bangs back. "We'll go shopping tomorrow, and you can help me pick out something, okay?"

Another nervous glance, followed by a barely noticeable nod.

Her mother smiles, and leans over to kiss the crown of her head. "Okay."

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When she's too sick to draw, she spends her time staring at picture books, and when she's too weak to hold a book, her mother reads for her instead.

As her mother turns to the next page, she notices how with every new picture, Homura squints her eyes, before she subtly tries to lift her head to stick her face closer.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura glances over.

"Is there something wrong with your eyes?"

She blinks in response.

Her mother sets up an appointment at the optometrist, and after a series of tests, she's fitted for a pair of glasses that will arrive by next week.

Light purple frames, and lenses that make her eyes wide, but she stares in wonder at how everything is suddenly clear and in focus.

Her hair is ruffled tenderly, and her mother gently leads her down the street.

"Let's get some ice cream, Homura-chan."

Homura turns to her shyly. "But... we're not supposed to eat before dinner...?"

Her mother smiles, one finger held to her lips. "I won't tell if you won't, Homura-chan."

Homura smiles, throwing her arms around her mother's legs to hug her tightly. "Okay."

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There's times when her mother passes by her room, and she hears Homura speaking quietly to herself. It's always a low murmur, and she only catches bits and pieces of her conversation.

She knows that if she pushes the door open, Homura will drop back down into silence, watching, and waiting until her mother leaves before she'll once again continue her one-sided conversations.

Between her visits to the hospital, and her constant absence from school, Homura doesn't have a single friend to her name, and it makes her parents so incredibly worried.

Her mother sets up a play date with a few of the children from the neighbourhood, but as she watches Homura interact with the other children, she can see their interest waning because of her timid nature.

They play tag, and Homura is called as it, but she's unable to keep up and collapses after a few minutes of play. Her mother scoops her into her arms, brushing back her sweaty bangs, and wiping down her flushed face.

She bows to the other mothers, and quickly carries Homura home.

As Homura sleeps her fatigue away, her mother hovers over her, watching the continual rise and fall of her chest.

She cries to herself, silent sobs racking her body as she knows that no matter what she does, she'll never be able to give her daughter a normal life.

"Ma..."

She quickly wipes her eyes dry, afraid that she has woken Homura up with her crying. Homura merely turns her head, pressing her face against her pillow as she continues her fitful sleep.

She gently brushes Homura's hair down, and leans over to kiss her forehead.

"Okaa-san loves you, Homura-chan."

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It's a brisk day in autumn, where the trees are growing bare, and the wind nips at their exposed skin. Homura pulls her mother along, impatient as she tries to make her walk faster.

"Homura-chan, there's no need to rush, they won't sell out so quickly."

She huffs lightly, "but–"

"Stop it, you're going to hurt yourself." Her mother tugs on Homura's arm, pulling her back. "It's still early, and you won't be able to eat the cake until after dinner anyway."

Homura falls into silence, and her mother instantly feels a stab of guilt. She gently leads Homura out of the way, mindful of other pedestrians walking that same path. She crouches, hands gentle as they fix Homura's scarf back into place.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura tucks her head in, hiding her face in the folds of cloth, but her mother can already see her eyes tearing behind her wide frames.

She gently brushes her bangs back, "what's wrong?"

The tears fall, and she gathers Homura into her arms. She can hear her babbling in between her sobs, and there's only a few words she catches.

"Shhh," she pats Homura's back as she hiccups into her ear. She pulls out her handkerchief, and gently pulls away to start wiping Homura's face dry. "We'll go wash up, and then we'll get your cake, okay, Homura-chan?"

Homura has her eyes lowered to the floor, and it's only when her mother's hand gently cups her cheek does she finally nod.

Her mother easily lifts her into her arms, and Homura presses her face close to the crook of her neck.

She pats her gently as she looks around, searching for the closest bathroom.

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They sit round the table for dinner, and every few seconds, Homura turns away from her meal, instead looking towards the refrigerator.

After the fifth time, there's a small clatter as her father lowers his chopsticks to his bowl. "What's this?"

At the sound of his voice, Homura blinks, and turns back to stare at him with wide eyes.

Her mother places a placating hand on her husband's arm, "Homura-chan's just excited for dessert," she explains as she glances to her daughter.

He nods, but points to Homura's bowl. "Not until you finish everything."

Homura glances to her mother, and she's given another stern nod. Reluctantly, she gathers her chopsticks once more into her hand, and continues the slow process of trying to fight her nonexistent appetite as she scoops rice into her mouth.

She manages to eat half, before she places her bowl down in defeat. She doesn't dare look at her father, and instead turns to her mother.

"Okaa-san, I'm full."

Both her parents look away from the TV to face her. She nervously keeps her eyes to the side, afraid she'll once again be scolded for not finishing her meal.

Instead of angry words, she hears the scraping of the chair as its pushed back.

When she sees her mother already approaching the refrigerator, she scrambles out of her chair and trots over to help her mother with the cake. As her mother pulls open the door, she finally speaks up.

"O-Okaa-san, I can carry it..."

"Hmm?" Her mother turns to her, giving her a smile, "okay, Homura-chan. Be careful." She reaches for the box, and then moves to gently place it into Homura's waiting hands. The refrigerator is shut, and Homura is shadowed closely as she makes her way out of the kitchen.

Only when the box is successfully transferred to the dining table, does her mother step away to gather the plates and a knife.

"O-Okaa-san!"

"Yes, Homura-chan?" Without turning to her daughter, she opens the cupboard.

"W-What about...?"

The plates are pulled down, and she then turns to Homura for clarification. "What about what, Homura-chan?"

Homura nervously crumples her dress in her hands, her eyes flickering from the cake, and then back to her mother's face.

"You–said..." Homura looks about ready to cry again, and her mother frowns as she tries to remember.

She sees the cake box again, and the conversation from this afternoon clicks into place. "Oh! Yes, of course, Homura-chan. Can you help me get them? There should be a few in the top drawer by the dishwasher."

Homura rushes over, but stops in her tracks when she hears her father's voice.

"Homura! What have I told you about running?"

She bows her head, fingers once again gathering fabric into her hands. "S-Sorry, Otou-san..."

He sighs at her response, and to show he means no harm, he reaches over to gently ruffle her hair.

She immediately tries to bat his hands away, whining in protest. "O-Otou-san!"

"Aren't you supposed to be getting something from the kitchen?" he replies, laughing lightly at her reaction.

She angrily brushes her bangs out of her face, frowning because her mother had braided her hair almost perfectly this morning.

"I'm getting them...!" she huffs out as she turns away from him.

She continues into the kitchen, and is so absorbed in her task that she misses the amused looks her parents exchange.

Once the drawer is pulled open, she stands on her tiptoes to peer inside. She riffles through the items, until she finally spots the ones she wants.

She holds them high above her head in triumph, turning around as her eyes seek out her mother: she's standing right by the cake. "Okaa-san, I found them."

Her mother nods, "bring them over here, Homura-chan."

"Okay."

It's not quite a run, but it's faster than a walk as she moves to join her parents. She hands them off to her mother as soon as she can, and her eyes are eager as the plastic packaging is torn open.

"How many did you want on the cake, Homura-chan?"

"Uhm..." she glances to the side, "...just one is okay."

Her mother pauses, looking at Homura for confirmation. "Just one?"

She bobs her head.

"What colour?"

Homura opens her mouth, but her mother already holds out the pink one in between her fingers.

"Pink, right?"

She bobs her head again. "Y-Yes."

"Is it someone's birthday?" Her father looks perplexed, even glancing to the calendar to check the date.

"Homura's celebrating a..." her mother glances at Homura's earnest face, "'friend's' birthday."

"Ah..."

Homura frowns, hearing the tone, but not understanding exactly why she doesn't like it. She forgets about it though when the white box is opened, revealing the strawberry cake inside.

"Can I put the candle on?" she asks softly, hands already reaching.

"Of course." Her mother passes over the candle. Homura grips it tightly, and carefully clambers onto a nearby chair for more height.

Her parents exchange another look when they see Homura turn her head to smile at something, before she carefully places the pink candle into where she thinks is the middle of the cake.

She glances up, meeting the eyes of her parents. "Can... we sing, too?"

Her mother nods slowly. "Yes, of course, Homura-chan. What..." she glances to the pink candle, "what should we call your friend?"

Homura smiles widely, for once showing off the gap in her front teeth. "Madoka."

Another worried look, before her mother steps back to grab a lighter from the kitchen.

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With the existence of Madoka, or maybe it's the acknowledgement that Madoka exists, there's a positive change in Homura that her parents are reluctant to accept.

On one hand, imaginary friends for children are a common occurrence, especially for someone as lonely as Homura. On the other hand, they are afraid it will alienate her even more from the other children, and even worse, that she will never grow out of it.

But the one thing they can't deny is that 'Madoka' is the friend that Homura needs in her life.

She is the one that keeps Homura company when she has to stay at the hospital; she is the one that Homura cries to when the burden of not being a normal child takes its toll.

For better, or for worse, Madoka is here to stay, and they'll humour her existence as long as it makes Homura happy.

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It's a quiet night in their apartment, and an increasingly rare night when Homura is at home, sleeping in her own bed.

Her condition is worsening, and the medication isn't working as well as it should be. With no other choice, her name is added to the ever long list of transplant patients, and at this point, all they can do is wait.

Unable to sleep, her mother thumbs through Homura's most recent notebook, pausing at each page to take a closer look at her daughter's newest drawings.

What used to be a nondescript scribble, has been replaced by an angel in grey–grey, because white doesn't show on the paper Homura had stated. An angel in grey with long strands of pink hair, and a pair of pink wings attached to her back.

Homura turns over in bed, and her mother places down the notebook to tuck the blankets around her.

She tenderly sweeps Homura's bangs to the side, smiling when Homura frowns lightly at the touch, before relaxing back to sleep.

Her mother continues to watch her for a moment longer, until she moves away to reach for the notebook once again. A hesitant glance to the cover, and then another glance to her sleeping daughter.

She bows her head, blinking back the sudden tears. "You've... been watching her all this time, haven't you, Madoka?" she whispers softly, keeping her voice low to not disturb Homura's sleep. "You know how kind Homura-chan is... what–an amazing girl she is." She swipes at her tears, "please, help my daughter survive. She–doesn't deserve this; she deserves to be normal. To laugh, to grow. To live. Please..."

Homura turns over in her sleep again as a small whines escapes her mouth. Her mother quickly wipes her hands dry on her dress, before gently placing her hand on Homura's forehead.

"It's okay, Homura-chan. Okaa-san is here."

Her hand is pushed away, and her mother merely repositions it to stroke Homura's head instead.

"It's okay, Homura-chan," she murmurs softly, trying to lull her back to sleep.

Eventually, Homura relaxes, and her breathing evens out.

Her mother kisses her forehead, "Okaa-san will be with you, always."

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When her condition worsens again, she's finally admitted to the hospital indefinitely. Here, and the staff can closely monitor her, and try to determine if they can find another alternative that will help as her name slowly climbs up that long list.

April, and the typhoon season is well underway. The wind howls and the windows rattle as another storm hits the city.

She flinches when another flash of light shines through, and waits with bated breath as the seconds pass, before a low rumble roars through the room.

The book in her hand shakes as her hands tremble, and she lowers it into her lap.

She smiles, shaking her head. "I'm okay..."

More lightning strikes, and another rumble of thunder follows suit. Too distracted to read, she eventually places her book onto the small table to her side. She grabs the switch attached to her bed frame, and spins the dial, dimming the lights.

Furious rain hits the glass windows, the sound loud enough to make her nervous. She sinks deeper into her blankets. Maybe, hopefully, the storm will be over once she wakes.

"Goodnight, Madoka," she murmurs as she pulls the covers over her head.

The room is quiet, save for the muffled pitter patters, and the low rumbles and shakes as the storm continues.

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Her mother affectionately brushes Homura's bangs back, smiling down at her daughter who's now fast asleep.

Preparations for the operation are under way, and hopefully, in a few days, Homura will wake up with a stronger heartbeat and a much brighter future.

The nurse by her side clears her throat, and she knows that her time is up.

"I will see you when you wake up, Homura-chan." One last kiss on her forehead, before she straightens up, stepping back to let the nurse roll her daughter away. Her husband wraps an arm around her shoulder, and she leans against him.

As Homura disappears around the corner, an old memory resurfaces– the day that Homura was born.

"Keep on fighting, Homura-chan. I know you will."

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The skies are clear the day her world comes crashing down.

They tell her it had been an accident; the roads had been slick with rain, that it was lucky their car had been the only casualty considering.

The skies are clear, but all the colours seem to slowly fade away. She's left alone in her hospital room, and immediately tries to turn to her side, but finds her body is too sore from her surgery to move.

A successful operation, with a bittersweet ending.

She stares at the ceiling, trying to blink back the tears. "M-Madoka... w-what do I do now?"

She reaches out with one hand, while the other is pressed against her chest. There's a coil of pressure around her heart, and she finds it hard to breathe.

All she sees is black and white, and all she hears is her own frantic breathing, followed by a jarring beep as her heart monitor suddenly springs into action.

"Madoka...?"

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She sleeps and sleeps, and each time she wakes up, she hopes that she'll see a familiar figure sitting to her side; hopes that everything had been but a bad dream.

All she sees is black and white, and an empty space that shouldn't be empty at all.

She closes her eyes.

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Her dress is black, tied with a ribbon that same shade in front. The shoes on her feet are too big, but it doesn't matter–she's still recovering. One of the social workers stands behind her, pushing her wheelchair down the hall to her destination.

Hushed whispers attack her from both sides, and she bows her head, eyebrows scrunched as she stubbornly refuses to cry.

A few of the guests have offered their condolences, but she remains mute to their words. They were friends of her parents, or relatives she has seen, but have never been close to.

The wake will start soon, and as she's pushed to the front to her seat, her eyes burn into the two black framed portraits lined side by side.

She's quickly pushed out of the room as she hyperventilates, crying her eyes out and calling desperately for her parents.

Afraid she'll harm herself even further, the onsite nurse injects her with sedatives, and she's transported back to the hospital.

When she finally opens her eyes again, the funeral has long since been over, and the only thing remaining of her parents is a small box, filled with useless trinkets one of her relatives had haphazardly packed.

Inside, she finds a picture of them together; her last, and her only. She places it under her pillow to keep it safe.

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She remains in the hospital, covered by her parent's life insurance as they try to find someone to care for her while she recovers.

Her name and situation is passed along her relatives, but none of them want to take in an ailing child. When the state comes up empty

handed, she's added to the roster to one of the various institutions in Tokyo, and once she is deemed healthy enough, she's shipped off within the week.

When she arrives at the crumbling brick building, she has a small bag with a few items to her name, and a permanent frown etched on her face. She is quiet and withdrawn, and the only words she whispers are to Madoka, her imaginary friend that no one else can see.

The staff watches her, but not close enough; she is the new girl, the one that speaks to thin air.

She is small, and she is weak; the bruises grow, and the injuries increase. One of the workers mistaken her injuries to be self-inflicted, and after a lengthy discussion on her mental health, she enters the hospital again, but in a different section, one that will try and heal her mind.

The walls are slowly closing in, and every day the doctor asks her about 'Madoka,' and what she means to her.

Trauma; a coping mechanism. A figment of her imagination, because she grew up a lonely child, and her parents spoiled her by letting it continue well into the years that 'Madoka' should no longer exist.

Every day they tell her: Madoka is not real.

Every day she tells her: Madoka, you're real.

She sits, back against the wall, knees pulled up close. "Madoka... I want to go home." She listens with one ear, waiting for the response that she knows will come.

Sleep is hard, and the meals are tasteless. Everyday, they repeat the same words over and over again.

Madoka does not exist.

Madoka is not real.

Madoka–

The tears well in her eyes.

"Madoka–"

She sucks in a painful breath.

"–doesn't–"

The weight on her shoulders come crashing down.

"–exist."

The medications are working as the whispers in her ears slowly fade. Finally, the doctors nod in approval. Her file is pulled up, and she's given a smile.

"There's good news, Homura-chan. We managed to come into contact with a cousin of your mother, and she's willing to take you in."

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A few more sessions, before her things are gathered, and she's sent on the next train over to Mitakihara. When she arrives, her new guardian takes one good look at her, and then turns around to leave.

"Follow me. Keep up."

At this point, she doesn't care if she makes it or not. Her chest hurts, and she closes her eyes, secretly wishing to never wake up again.

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Her body is sore, and slight movement sends a jolt of pain through her chest.

She gasps, but cuts herself off as it makes it hurt even more.

"You shouldn't move yet," a voice tells her.

Her eyes widen, and her body moves in surprise.

There's spots of white and black, and the last thing she hears is a sigh as her vision fades.

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Stress, they tell her when she wakes. She nods slowly, and takes her medicine as she's prescribed. When she's finally strong enough to stand on her two feet, her guardian makes an appointment at the optometrist, and she's finally fitted into a new pair of glasses that she has been needing for years.

She's uninterested as she browses the selection of frames, and the only reaction she gives is when she spots a pair of red ones that are placed in between everything that is black.

Her guardian notices, and scoops those up without asking her, and in a few days, her vision is once more clear and the world is no longer a fuzzed out blur.

She's growing sleepy, and for once, her guardian is there, her stern eyes watching as she settles into bed.

"Homura."

She looks up as clumsy hands help her readjust her blankets into place.

"...I won't lie to you, I only agreed to take you in because I'm in between jobs right now, and the monthly stipend given for being your foster parent is better than nothing."

She silently nods.

"I had an interview last week, and the job seems promising."

She snuggles up to her pillow carefully, knowing that a crumpled piece of paper sits underneath it.

"Unfortunately, it's in a different city... I'll most likely commute for the first few months, but I will probably get an apartment as soon as my hours are finalized."

Her guardian glances at her, and it's the first time Homura realizes the shade of her eyes are close to her mother's.

"Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

She looks away, staring up at the white ceiling instead.

"My apartment here will be vacant," she tells her, "and... if you want, you can stay there. You'll be by yourself though. I'll deposit a small amount into an account I'll make for you so that you can spend it on groceries and things like that."

Hands pat down her blankets again, and she sneaks another glance over.

"...It's your choice, of course. But I can already tell you that your other option is to go back."

She knows where back is.

"I'll still have guardianship over you, but for the most part you'll have to depend on yourself."

To her surprise, she sees the woman's lips twitch into a small smile.

"And, I think you're perfectly capable of that."

Another pat, before the woman straightens up.

"I'll give you a few days to think about it."

She hears the gentle clicks of her heels as she walks out the room. Alone, and she stares up at the ceiling, mind blank, until her eyes grow heavy with sleep.

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Taking the advice of her guardian, she applies to Mitakihara Middle School, though it'll still be a few months until she'll be able to attend.

On her departure day, her guardian drops by her hospital room with a small box in her hands.

She gives a curious glance, setting aside her book as the box is placed on her lap.

"I managed to grab a few things before they took everything away." The woman gently pats the lid. "You've recovered enough now that I think you'll be able to handle it. I already took care of most of the

paperwork, and I'll be back once you're closer to your discharge date."

Another pat, before she steps back. She moves to turn away, but suddenly turns back.

"Your parents would be proud of you," she awkwardly pats Homura's hand, "it's been a long, hard road for you; you've done well, making it this far. Take care, Homura."

She watches as that stranger walks out the door without a backward glance.

She's alone in her room once more, and curious, she turns to the box, easily lifting the lid.

Her breath catches, and with trembling fingers, she reaches for a small stack of papers–pictures of her parents that she had thought she had lost forever.

It's the first time in months when her feelings bubble up, and her lips quiver as she tries to fight back the tears. Her glasses are lifted, and she presses her hands into her eyes as she finally remembers.

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Every waking moment is spent poring over each item in the box, and she only stops when fatigue sets in, and she's unable to keep her eyes open.

She continues to dream in black and white, though sometimes there's a familiar shade of pink she sees floating to her side.

There's only one notebook from when she was younger, and it's filled with childish sketches, and most importantly, a familiar name scrawled on almost every page.

"Ma...doka?" She blinks, feeling something twinge in the back of her mind.

It's a familiar name, but like the thought of her parents, it makes her chest pull, and makes her so incredibly sad.

She doesn't dwell on it too long, but sometimes she looks to her side almost expectantly, as if knowing that someone should be there.

It's a constant thought, like a forgotten word that sits on the very tip of her tongue.

But no matter how hard she tries to remember, she can't, and eventually, the name once again slips away.

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The day she leaves the hospital, she's alone as she takes a taxi to her apartment. She has never been there, and when she sees the looming architecture of an old fashioned building, she gulps nervously as a feeling of dread washes over her.

She has no one else though, and no where else to go. She pays the driver the tab, and after another glance to the entrance, she carries her bag inside.

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It's a transition from the bustling hospital room, to her disturbingly quiet apartment. Not used to the silence, eventually she digs up an old-fashioned radio left in one of the packed boxes, and plugs that in.

The low murmurs of voices and music comforts her, and she leaves it on even when she sleeps.

Sometimes when she's about to fall asleep, the voices sharpen, and she can vaguely register someone calling out her name.

She never remembers this when she wakes, and the only thing left is a familiar emptiness felt in her heart.

She hopes things will change once school begins, and she's counting down the days until then.

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School is as she remembers, except this time there's no hospital room for her to hide in, and no parents to comfort her when the first day falls flat.

As she shuffles down the streets to her apartment, her shoulders slump heavily. She can still hear the laughter of the other students when she had collapsed after warm-ups for gym.

She sighs, her eyes closing as they prickle with frustrated tears.

"...Will I always be like this?" she whispers to herself.

There's a clatter to her side, and she jumps at the sudden sound, one hand flying to her chest in fear. She glances around, and gulps nervously when she notices the streets are deserted.

Another rustle, and she holds her bag in front of her, knees bent in as she shakes.

A loud metal clang, and she flinches, heart now beating loudly in her chest.

She sees black–

"Meow."

She blinks as a small black cat steps out from the alley, its tail raised in greeting.

Relief floods her body, and she collapses to the floor as she tries to calm her heart.

She squeaks when something nudges her hand, and looks down to see the black cat headbutting her hand.

"Ah... uhm..." she nervously reaches forward, and watches as the cat fits its head under her palm, pressing its ears against her fingers.

She smiles, and gently runs her hand against its soft fur.

"Hello," she says softly, scratching it behind the ears, "what are you doing here, Kitty-chan?"

"Meow," a rough tongue licks her hand, and she feels her mood lift as she hears the continuous purring.

"Are you... alone too, Kitty-chan?"

As if replying, the cat meows, and pulls away to shake its head. It flicks its ears, and starts licking its paw as she continues to watch it, debating.

Before she can reach for it again, they both hear the sounds as a vehicle turns the corner. Its ears perk, before it suddenly bounds off back into the alley.

She follows it with her eyes, disappointed as the black tail disappears back into the shadows.

She glances around, and finally remembers that she's sitting on the ground. She's glad the streets are still empty, and carefully picks herself up, hands moving to brush the dirt from her skirt and legs.

Another hopeful look into the alley as she strains her ears. She hears only the wind rustling, and sighs softly to herself.

Reluctantly, she continues on her way.

\\

When she pushes the door open, the murmurs from the radio greet her, and she pauses in the entryway, listening as music drifts through the apartment.

"...I'm back," she calls out softly, gently closing the door behind her.

The chain lock is slid into place, and she remains facing the door as the music continues. Her eyes close, and if she concentrates hard enough, she can hear a familiar voice in her mind.

"Welcome back, Homura-chan. How was school?"

She presses her forehead against the door, "horrible. I couldn't do anything right."

"It's okay, Homura-chan. It was only your first day. You'll definitely get better! Keep your head up!"

She slouches, hands bunching into fists. "H-How do you know? I'm–clumsy, and weak and–I can't–do this."

"You can, Homura-chan! You can do anything you put your mind to! I believe in you, Homura-chan!"

She whirls around, angry tears now trailing down her cheeks. "I can't! You–wouldn't even understand, Madoka!"

The familiar name tumbles out of her mouth, and she freezes in place. Her anger slowly drains out, and she's left catching her breath as she continues to stare at the empty space in front of her.

A hand is held to her forehead, and her eyes are unfocused as something flashes in her mind.

"Who...?"

/

She forgets about the incident soon enough. The thought of school hits her once more when she's reminded of the homework sitting in her school bag. It's mostly review material, and luckily for her, the teachers are understanding, and most are giving her about a week or two to ease into the curriculum. She'll eat a small snack, and then review her notes for an hour, before taking a bath and then heading to bed.

She sets her bag down onto the couch, and slowly walks to the kitchen, stifling a yawn.

Today was merely a minor setback; she'll... catch up, somehow.

\\

The next day isn't much better, except one of the girls in class takes pity on her, offering to escort her to the nurse's office when she's not feeling well during lunch.

It's been a while since she has talked to anyone her age, and she keeps her head down the whole way. The other girl tries to make conversation, but each of her questions are left unanswered. Eventually, she also falls into silence.

They continue outside, taking a shortcut between two buildings. With the structures looming overhead, the other girl suddenly whirls around with a frown.

"You know, you not saying anything makes it seem like I'm bullying you or something."

She twists her jacket sleeve and barely musters enough courage to glance up.

Seconds pass, and just as she's about to open her mouth to apologize, the other girl sighs and turns back around.

"Let's just get to the nurse's office."

She hears footsteps moving away, and quickly follows after.

They both feel relief when they finally arrive in front of the nurse's office. The other girl knocks on the door once, calling out an 'excuse me.' There's no response, and she pushes the door open.

A quick glance around reveals an empty room. "The nurse is probably at lunch right now... I'll sign you in, and you can probably just sleep in one of the beds until she gets back?"

She dips her head down, "t-thank you, Miki-san..."

A hand casually waves her away. "It's fine, transfer student. Hope you feel better soon."

"Thank you..."

/

When she leaves school that day, classes have been dismissed, and the nurse is also just about ready to go.

After reassuring her that she is fine to leave on her own, she slowly makes her way out the gates, hands gripping her schoolbag, eyes focused dejectedly on the floor as she heads home.

Past a familiar alleyway, and glowing eyes watch her for a moment, before small paws pad forward.

Something brushes against her leg, and she squeaks, eyes wide, but relaxes when she hears the purr of the small black cat.

Her tension fades, and she crouches, fingers gentle as she runs her hand through its black fur.

"Kitty-chan. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to see you again." She hesitantly reaches down, and when the black cat stares at her, not running away, she slips her hands under it's front legs to bring the cat close for a hug.

It's warm, and she can feel its soft heartbeat; feel the small vibrations from the rumble in its throat.

"You're so small, but you seem so strong... If... only I could be stronger, too..."

The cat stiffens in her hands, its paws and body suddenly twisting as it demands for her to let go. She barely manages to lower it to the floor when it finally breaks free, and lands on the sidewalk on four legs.

/Is that a wish that your soul will shine for?/

The cat hisses, and Homura turns as a white creature with glowing red eyes steps from the shadows.

Her mouth opens, "you... you talked...?"

To her surprise, the white creature bows its head in greeting.
/Evening, Akemi Homura. I am Kyuubey./

She gives him a blank stare.

/

She sighs softly, eyes closing to momentarily block out the glare of the light. She shifts, and her movements create small ripples on the watery surface.

Her eyes open, unfocused as her thoughts continue to spin in her mind.

She shakes her head, and this time, sits up. The water sloshes, and a small bit spills to the tiled floor. She ignores it, instead turning so that her arms rest along the rim of the bathtub. She lowers her chin to her arms, and once again closes her eyes.

"...A wish, huh...?"

\\

Dried and dressed from her bath, she collapses face first into her bed, and remains lying there for a few moments. She turns her head, and squinting her eyes, she takes note of the time.

She sighs, and closes her eyes.

/

She dreams that night, that her parents are alive, but they are not the same that she remembers them to be. Her mother's smile is not as kind, and her father's eyes are not as bright.

/It is against the rules to wish for someone to return from the dead, Akemi Homura. Their place in the world has already been filled; these are no longer your parents./

Her mouth opens, and she wakes to a loud scream; it takes a moment until she realizes that it's her own voice, and she collapses against her bed, tears running down her cheeks.

\\

/Are you sure you have nothing to wish for, Akemi Homura?/

Kyuubey is persistent, and he follows her around when he's not busy with the other girls that he has supposedly contracted.

/Maybe you'd like to meet them; a little companionship will benefit you, will it not, Akemi Homura?/

She narrows her eyes ever briefly, wondering if he knew that she ate all her meals alone.

She hesitates.

/If you turn here, you can meet one of them./

She freezes, but it's too late.

/

She quietly picks at the paper, tearing it slowly to reveal the dessert underneath.

"Hmmm, never thought you'd be the candidate that Kyuubey was talking about, transfer student."

She ducks her head, eyes glancing to the speaker, before looking away.

The blonde sitting nearby smiles, but she misses the gesture as she keeps her eyes glued to her crepe.

"Ah, uhm, Akemi-san, was it?"

She timidly glances up, and this time catches the kind smile.

"Please do not be afraid. There's no pressure for you to make your wish or anything either. If you want, we could share our experiences," she nods to the redhead who's devouring her snack, "if it could help you?"

She blinks, but realizes that all three(four) pairs of eyes are now staring at her. "It... If you don't mind... Tomoe-san..."

The blonde smiles again. "Not at all, Akemi-san."

\\

/Time travel is also against the rules, Akemi Homura. Once, the rules were not so limiting, but at this moment, this timeline may no longer be changed./

She nods, frowning. It really seems she wouldn't be allowed to bring her parents back.

She stares up to the ceiling, eyes unblinking as she tries to think of something she'd be willing to wish for.

Her eyes unconsciously move around the room, and she pauses when she sees the framed pictures lined along her nightstand. She slowly sits up.

She nervously licks her lips; there–definitely is something she could wish for.

/

The air is heavy, is cold. Each breath she takes seems to coat her throat as the cool fog sinks deep, deeper into her lungs. She's petrified, body frozen with fear.

The streets and buildings around her shine with a red sheen, a sign that they're now trapped in a barrier buried beneath the surrounding miasma.

Through the rush as winds whip at her hair, she can hear Mami and Kyouko shouting back and forth, their voices cutting in and out as the roar in her ears grow louder and louder. The miasma interferes with Kyuubey's telepathy, and they can only rely on their unreliable voices to keep in touch.

Her legs suddenly collapse underneath her, and her body lowers to the floor; a hand held to her chest, and the occasional glimpses of crimson and golden are the only comforts found in this unrelenting environment.

Sayaka is nowhere to be found, but the sharp clangs of metal–followed by more shouting, means she's out there, somewhere.

"Sayaka! Wha...you doing... idiot!"

"Miki-san... down!"

An anguished reply echoes, one loud and strong enough to reverberate around the surrounding area; the anger palatable enough that it seems to shake her heart.

/Quick, Akemi Homura! You need to make a wish!/

The unexpected jarring voice in her mind sends her pulse racing, and the unwanted feathery touch as a white blur darts around her legs makes her body involuntarily curl in.

/The wraith is too powerful–Sayaka is expending too much energy! At this rate–she'll die./

Her blood runs cold. "D-Die...?"

/Hurry! There isn't much time! You told me that you thought of something that your soul would shine for, didn't you, Akemi Homura?/

She gulps loudly, throat suddenly dry. A chill breaks out, and she wipes down sweaty palms on the surface of her skirt.

It's too soon; she's not ready.

"Sayaka!"

Kyouko and Mami, their voices more desperate.

/You could turn the tide. They need your help. You can save them./

She swallows heavily, trying to force that invisible lump down. Hands shaking, she presses them down into her legs to steady them. Trembling, she turns to Kyuubey, and jumps when she sees how clear his eyes shine red despite everything around them that is washed out in a grey hue.

"I–" she swallows again, "I wish–"

"Sayaka!"

With widened eyes, she watches as a small light seems to pierce through the haze of their surroundings. It pulsates, growing bright and blue; a round, concentration of light that suddenly expands outwards, exploding, and quickly followed by a rush of wind.

She brings her arms up in front of her in defense, eyes now closed as the air displaces, throwing dust, cloth, and anything and everything in its path up to shake in the wind.

The sudden ringing in her ears; screams, silence, and then no more.

She blinks in confusion as her vision is peppered with little lights like stars in her eyes; closed, and then opened, and her confusion only grows when the colours blend and gradient to black, pink, and red, pulsating with a gentle rhythm, one that matches her heartbeat.

With a gasp, her eyes open wider, and she spins her body round: her surroundings are glowing. It's suddenly night, and there really are stars around her.

Just as sudden, and she feels the air shift, and a warm glow that makes her lift her head. The colour is gentle and subtle, like blooming cherry blossoms close to being carried away by the wind.

"Homura-chan."

The voice echoes in her mind, and all thoughts stop as her chest swells and overflows with emotion.

"...Ma...doka...?"

A gentle smile, "you remember?" Still smiling, Madoka shakes her head, "of course you would. I'm sorry."

Madoka is right in front of her now, and on impulse, she reaches out, one hand extended, shaking. Madoka is but an illusion, a figment of her imagination; an imaginary friend that she made up during her lonely childhood.

The touch is solid, and her breath hitches when her hand rests on ethereal white.

A gentle breeze, and arms wrap around her, holding her close, engulfing her vision with pink. The embrace is warm, and she sinks into it, letting herself be held.

"I missed you, too."

Her eyes water, overflowing with tears as her emotions unravel. "Madoka–" she chokes on her words, and presses her face forward, her arms gripping Madoka almost desperately.

A light touch on her head, and a reciprocated hug. "Homura-chan."

Her mind reels, and she's unable to convey her emotions into words. She repeats Madoka's name over and over again, almost as if she's afraid if she didn't, she'd disappear.

Just like before.

"I'm so, so sorry, Homura-chan," Madoka replies immediately, too coincidentally. Knowingly.

There is no surge of anger, just an empty ache that gnaws at her chest. She pulls away gently, and Madoka does the same. She lifts her head, and golden eyes with tears unshed watches her closely.

There's a brief moment when she thinks–knows–that shade should be a different colour–but the present hits her again, and she can feel as the air subtly changes.

She has questions that need answers.

Who are you, really?

Where did you go?

Why weren't you here when I needed you?

Why–

"Will we meet again?"

Their surroundings swirl–with stars, with the galaxy–and their bodies glow as time draws near.

She's crying now, "please, don't leave me." Her voice is small and timid as she pleads.

Madoka shakes her head, "I won't leave you. Even if you can't see me, I'm still with you."

"No–"

Madoka pulls away, "Homura-chan."

She refuses to budge.

"Homura-chan."

She doesn't want to, but–

"Please, Homura-chan?"

She opens her eyes.

Hands cover hers, and then they're lifted, held between the both of them. A catch of movement, and her curiosity gets the best of her as she glances down.

Her palms are turned upward, and Madoka places something on top–

A pair of red ribbons.

"Miracles do exist, Homura-chan. We'll definitely meet again."

Her breath catches in her throat as Madoka gently pulls away.

"No-! No-! Don't go, Madoka! Don't leave–!"

The colours flash, and her eyes close as the brightness is unbearable. Her grips slackens, and her body pitches forward as her support disappears.

She's floating, and the sounds are fading as the air shifts once again.

Something is whispered in her ear, and she squeezes her eyes shut as the tears trickle down.

Gravity catches her as she falls, and her knees slightly bend as her heels clack onto pavement.

"Sayaka! Where are you?"

She slowly opens her eyes. Her hands curl in, and the soft touch of fabric crinkles underneath her fingers.

The voices call to her, but she ignores them as she lifts her hands.

A pair of red ribbons.

Her vision blurs, and she clings to them desperately, bowing her head as the tears freely flow.

Nearby, a lamp post rattles as a fist slams into its side. "Damnit, Sayaka. Just when we became friends."

She cradles the ribbons. "Ma...doka..."

Her voice makes Mami look over, "Akemi-san...?"

/

The mid-afternoon sun is warm and bright. She squints, moving one hand to shade her eyes. It's a clear day today, minimal clouds, and the reflective blue that only a summer sky can bring.

/There you are, Akemi Homura./

She ignores the voice, closing her eyes and letting her hand fall back to her side. The rough surface underneath her is just as warm, and her fingers press into the concrete, curling in.

/Don't you need to meet Mami and Kyouko soon?/

She sighs softly, turning her head as she opens her eyes. White paws, and further up, the gaze of unblinking red eyes.

A chill runs through her body, and she sits up, suddenly no longer feeling warm.

"...I'll leave in a little bit," she murmurs, running her hand through her hair almost absently.

After a few moments, she glances over, and realizes that Kyuubey has yet to leave.

"You can go first without me."

Kyuubey continues to stare. She sighs again, and slowly gets to her feet. A brush of her skirt, and then of her legs, and just as she straightens up, a light touch around her body makes her want to shiver.

From his perch on her shoulder, Kyuubey still watches. /The miasma has been thick lately; we'll be able to harvest quite a bit of grief cubes tonight./

She doesn't reply, and starts making her way towards the stairs that will bring her down to the ground floor. Her pace is slow, and she keeps her head turned, looking past the steel fence to catch the glimpses of blue caught in between the gaps.

/Homura./

She pauses mid-step, and glances to Kyuubey out of the corner of her eye.

/What are you thinking about?/

His high pitched voice sounds almost curious.

She flicks her hair back, "...nothing," she replies softly.

/...About Madoka?/

She turns away, and once again starts walking.

Sensing her refusal at idle chit chat, Kyuubey falls into silence.

Once she reaches the entrance to the stairway, she takes another look behind her.

The sky is bright enough to make the back of her eyes prickle. Unconsciously, she lifts her hand, fingers gentle as they brush against the ribbons that rest in her hair.

Another moment, before she quickly continues forwar**d.**

AN: Hi. First off, thank you for reading, and for reviewing. On those rare occasions I see something new, I'm still surprised people are still reading some of these stories, so thank you again.

And I'm sure some of you are thinking, who is this rumiberri, and what is this story, or maybe it's more like ewwww it's rumiberri againn.

Or maybe it's none of those, maybe it's hello, and how are you, and an update ?!

I agree, it's a been a while, or maybe it hasn't been, and it's a nice to meet you.

Hope everyone is doing okay, or you're working on your way to being okay. Until next time, take care.